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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 001162

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TAGS: PGOV PREL FR

SUBJECT: WHY FRANCE CLAIMS SYRIA HELPED CONVINCE IRAN TO FREE FRENCH PRISONER

REF: A. PARIS POINT AUGUST 18 2009

¶B. PARIS 1097

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen H. Allegrone, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Despite their proactive media blitz proclaiming Syria's "important" role in persuading Iran to release French citizen Clotilde Reiss from prison, French officials admit in private they do not know what Syrian President Assad, or his government, actually did. The French have deliberately publicized Assad's role in order to encourage Assad to play a more constructive intermediary role in the region, and to sow seeds of discord between Syria and Iran. This French media effort also aims to validate Sarkozy's policy of early engagement with Syria. In addition, French officials provided a few more words of advice on handling the American hostages in Iran, and described the compromises they made to secure Reiss's release. END SUMMARY.

SYRIAN ROLE: THE SPIN

¶2. (SBU) Since August 11, when a French Presidency press release first singled out Syria for appreciation, French government officials, journalists, and academics have pondered the "important" and "influential" role Syria played as "mediator" between France and Iran in the conflict surrounding the July 1 arrest by Iranian security officers of French citizen Clotilde Reiss (see ref 1). U.S. mainstream media have followed suit. Time magazine published a story on August 17 that quoted a French diplomat (who wished to remain anonymous) describing Syrian President Assad's advocacy as vindication of President Sarkozy's 2008 outreach to Syria, viewed at the time as premature and unmerited by many critics at home and abroad. "There's some genuine (Syrian) gratitude at work right now," proclaimed the unnamed diplomat.

SYRIAN ACTIONS: THE JURY IS STILL OUT

¶3. (S/NF) How did Assad's purported gratitude manifest itself in this sensitive issue? Despite their laudatory pronouncements, French officials claim to have only a vague notion of what the Syrians actually did. President Sarkozy's Strategic Affairs Advisor Franois Richier told Political Minister Counselor on August 11, and again on August 19, that when the French released their statement, thanking the Syrians, they did not know what message the Syrians might have sent to Iran, nor by what channels. MFA Syria Desk Officer Patrick Durel on August 18 confirmed that President Sarkozy called Syrian President Assad August 5 to ask for his assistance in persuading the Iranians to release Clotilde Reiss from prison. Assad agreed to raise the matter with the Iranians, and shortly thereafter he told Sarkozy that he had placed a call to Tehran. Assad did not, however, name his

interlocutor or interlocutors. "I'm doing what I can to help" was the message he sent to Paris, Durel explained.

NEW PUBLIC POSTURE FROM ASSAD?

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¶4. (S/NF) Richier and Durel suggested that the GOF has sought to exaggerate the Syrian role deliberately, in order to demonstrate to Syria the praise they might win for playing a constructive role in the region, and in order to create tension between Syria and Iran. And the French believe they have succeeded on both fronts. As a sign that Syrians welcomed the praise they received for playing a helpful part in Reiss's release, Durel cited the absence of a public denial by Assad. In the past, Assad disavowed such activity. Durel explained, for instance, that Assad had agreed in private during July of 2008 to pass a message from Paris to Tehran about the dangers of the Iranian nuclear program, but he publicly denied having done so, declaring he did not want to play the role of intermediary. Moreover, according to Richier, the French believe their reference to Syrian intervention has sewn some discomfort among the Iranians, whom the French hear from various sources want them to "stop this stupid Syria business." In advance of Assad's August 19 visit to Tehran, the French continued to tout Syria's role and encouraged him to raise the issue of Clotilde Reiss's still-pending court case.

ADVICE ON U.S. HOSTAGES IN IRAN

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¶5. (S/NF) Both Richier and MFA Middle East DAS Ludovic

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Pouille told us that other countries also sent messages to and applied pressure on the Iranians -- most notably, EU member states, Qatar and Turkey. It is unclear if Reiss would have been freed without such interventions, Pouille commented. Richier made the same point, noting that public and private messages helped shame and embarrass the Iranian regime. He also argued that the French success in painting Reiss as simply a young student/teacher with a keen interest in and love of Iran proved a key to their success.

FRENCH MAKE COMPROMISES TO SECURE RELEASE OF REISS

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¶6. (S/NF) Now that Reiss is at the French Embassy in Tehran, the GOF plans to decrease their public pronouncements about her, according to Richier. In the discussions with the Iranians on her release, the French made some concessions to Iranian demands, but stayed firm on certain principles. Richier said they agreed to pay of bail and to comply with an anticipated court order for Reiss to appear at subsequent judicial hearings. They also elected not to contest Reiss's court-appointed lawyer, but rather to accept him and use him to carry messages. On the other hand, they rejected all attempts at blackmail or negotiation. Richier confirmed that the Iranians did at one point raise the issue of Iranian national, Majid Kakavan, to suggest a trade, but the French refused. (NOTE: Majid Kakavand is an Iranian national whom the French arrested March 20 at Charles de Gaulle airport on the behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice on proliferation issues (see reftel 2). END NOTE.)

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